

Bill Fromhold

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CAPITAL LETTER:

A report from
your Legislature

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Dear Fellow Citizen:

We adjourned the 2004 Legislature earlier this month.

As always, it is an honor to file a legislative report with you and other citizens in our southwestern Washington communities.

When we convened in January, we knew we'd face a wide variety of issues in our 60-day meeting. A few observers actually predicted — *incorrectly* — that we'd have to go overtime to get the job done. Looking back now that we're finished, I'd have to say the underlying themes from the 2004 session come down to economic development, health care, and education. These issues involve, one way or another, every Washington resident, family, and business.

I hope you continue to stay in touch with me whenever you have concerns or questions. Ann Tjersland, my senior legislative assistant, and I look forward to reviewing your comments either about the Legislature or about state government in general.

Thank you for your interest in the process!

Respectfully,

Bill Fromhold

State Representative

49th Legislative District

Spring 2004

Representative Bill Fromhold

Economic development:

Tax incentives, with strong accountability, are the surest way to quality jobs

The extended economic downturn – combined with the slow recovery and even slower job-growth – underscores the need to do everything possible to support the development and retention of good-paying, dependable jobs.

The recession has hit Washington as hard as any state in the nation — and it's hit Clark County as hard as any region in the Northwest.

When businesses aren't doing well, people lose their jobs — or at best they lose benefits and security at the job they're able to keep. Many families have a mighty struggle to make rent or mortgage payments and get groceries, let alone afford things like health care and college tuition.

So we came into this session committed to building jobs. Quality jobs.

Five weeks after the Legislature convened, we approved legislation – and then the governor signed it – to extend tax incentives for high-tech, research-and-development activities. **This new policy is a job-maker and a job-keeper.** Tax deferrals are also included for research facilities operated by the universities — and the business-and-occupation tax is eliminated on research grants for small companies.

I emphasized and ensured that accountability is fundamental in this measure. By that, I mean accountability for companies receiving incentives. We want to make sure the incentives are truly doing the job: strengthening businesses *and* putting people to work.

Smaller budget fills holes

Last year, we bridged a \$2.7-billion budget chasm primarily by imposing cuts — there were no general increases in taxes. With the economy at least slowly improving, this year's supplemental-budget challenge was less intimidating.

This new budget is designed to take care of mandated caseload demands, such as an increase in

school-enrollment, a larger prison population, and a growing need for social services.

The new and strongly bipartisan budget addresses these unforeseen needs — again without relying on any tax hikes. We've also been able to incorporate a solid reserve.



Health care:

It seems to me that basic medical coverage is a fundamental part of a budget

I mentioned the unexpected increase in citizens who need help making ends meet.

A big part of keeping a family above water has to do with quality, affordable health care — especially where children are involved.

One example of the social-services part of the budget is the assistance we maintain in basic health care. The new budget gets rid of the premiums for many children in the Medicaid health-care program. This applies to kids in families with incomes less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level. (What is 150 percent of the

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poverty level? A family of three making \$23,000 a year.)

These are very vulnerable families. Downturns in the economy are a challenge for most people. But for some families, these economic problems are terribly threatening — especially for their children.

Providing these services for people who need them is the right thing to do. Plus, I believe it's fiscally responsible to invest in programs for families in need, particularly when you consider this: We can provide basic health care now and keep costs relatively low — or we can pay far higher medical bills later when basic health-care situations grow very expensive.

The new budget funds the contract with home-care workers, providing a much-deserved pay increase and health-care benefits for women and men who do some of our society's most important work for senior citizens and disabled citizens.

We approved a bill to help small firms buy health insurance by allowing insurance companies to market what's called an "economy plan." Money is also available for hospitals taking care of uninsured or medically indigent patients. Along these same lines, the new budget provides more money for our community clinics, and stabilizes long-term-care facilities caring for elderly citizens and disabled citizens.

Education:

Our push to build world-class schools is always a work-in-progress

No less than economic development and health care, education is a key part of any legislative agenda. After our families, of course, our schooling — public or private or in our home — is what most tells the kind of adults we become.

The budget includes funding to equip schools with more tools to strengthen reading and mathematics instruction.

Schools whose students improve won't face the Catch-22 of actually *losing* funds in the Learning Assistance Program. Importantly, districts will be able to collect the full amount of a tax levy that receives super-majority approval from voters. We also shored up funding

for levy-equalization help for smaller districts that aren't well-heeled in property-tax revenue.

Another education direction revises the Washington Assessment of Student Learning so high-school students have a more reasonable opportunity to pass the demanding new graduation requirements.

Qualifying communities will also be able to set up a charter school as a way to best serve diverse student needs.

Higher education remains key

The 2004 Legislative Session was very productive for our nearly three-dozen colleges and universities.

We approved additional funding so four-year schools can increase their enrollment, particularly in high-demand fields such as engineering, health care, biotechnology, and high-tech industries. Additional financial help is made available for many hard-working students whose families can't afford ever-increasing tuition.



A very important and successful measure for our Vancouver area directs that our community will come together to forecast higher education needs in the region over the next six to 10 years. Then, we'll provide a plan for legislative review and action. This is critically important to ensure that we're able to bring resources to our community to meet the growing demand of higher education right here at home.

I was disappointed that the full Legislature didn't embrace binding arbitration to settle future school-district strikes. Another disappointment was the fact that the Senate — again — refused to accept the idea of asking voters to consider lowering the "Yes" requirement to a "simple-majority" for districts to pass levies.

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Furthermore: New primary tops the list of additional issues faced in Olympia

Many other issues captured our attention this session — foremost among them being the primary-election debate that has swirled around the capital for many years.

Due to federal-court rulings and major-party challenges, our 69-year-old blanket primary must go. The new primary that passed this year would have sent the top two primary vote-getters to the general election. It would be somewhat akin to the old primary — except that the general election could feature two candidates from the same party, and minor-party candidates would rarely get to the general.

This bill states that if the “Top Two” section is vetoed, a fallback “Montana” primary for the major parties is implemented. Minor parties will hold conventions, and their qualifying candidates will go directly to the general election. There is no party-registration in this system. The voter, though, must choose to affiliate with a major party – at least on primary day – in order to obtain a primary ballot. There will be no “crossover” voting, and no record is kept of the ballot you choose.

As of this writing, the governor did choose to veto the “Top Two” system, leaving us with the “Montana” primary. It remains to be seen whether there will be a court challenge to this primary system we’re left with.

You’re always welcome to call or write for more information either about the primary-election issue or about anything else. Feel free to call me or my assistant, Ann Tjersland, in Olympia at 360-786-7924. We appreciate the opportunity to serve you in the 49th District!

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